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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001212

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TAGS: PREL PINS KISL RP

SUBJECT: MILF VICE CHAIR FOR MILITARY AFFAIRS SUPPORTS
PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

REF: A. MANILA 455 (AMB URGES MILF CHIEF TO REJECT
TERRORISTS)

1B. MANILA 1021 (AMB AND FOREIGN SECRETARY DISCUSS
PEACE PROCESS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Meeting in a remote base camp in the southern Philippines May 9, DCM urged the Vice Chairman for Military Affairs of the Muslim insurgency to persevere with the peace process and remove remaining terrorists from its territories. The Vice Chair stressed the Muslim insurgency's opposition to terrorism and desire for successful peace negotiations. The Vice Chair also requested U.S. help to convince the Philippine government to sign the draft peace document now under consideration. The Vice Chair worried that neither side could control all commanders if international monitors depart. (Malaysia pulled out most of its International Monitoring Team members May 10 due to lack of progress in negotiations. ref B) If fighting breaks out, he continued, the Muslim insurgency will have a clear conscience, having tried its best for peace. The Vice Chair welcomed the DCM's visit with enthusiasm, recalling the history of U.S. engagement in Muslim southern Philippines, as well as a letter from EAP Assistant Secretary Kelly in 2003, on behalf of President Bush, that acknowledged "legitimate grievances" of Muslims, and President Bush's speech to the Philippine Congress in 2003 admonishing the Muslim insurgency to sever ties to terrorists. This meeting provided a first-hand insight into the Vice Chair, who has been variously characterized as opposed to peace negotiations, disaffected from Moro Islamic Liberation Front leader Murad, or essential in keeping insurgent military commanders under control. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Vice Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MIF) Aleem Abdulaziz Mimbartas invited DCM, on the margins of the Ambassador's meeting with MILF Chairan Murad Ebrahim last February 21 (ref A), to viit his camp in the Lake Lanao region of Muslim Mndanao. DCM, DATT and A/RSO were greeted May 9 ith a red carpet and honor guard at the remote Cam Bushra, located on the south side of Lake Lanao n the municipality of Butig. The camp also servs as a meeting place for the joint MILF-governmet ceasefire committee. Inside, Mimbartas introduced 20 military commanders and another 20 provincial leaders before inviting DCM to a private meeting. The Philippine police, who provided security for the DCM's delegation, were permitted to enter the camp perimeter.

Opposing Terrorists

13. (C) In a one-on-one meeting attended by an interpreter, Mimbartas said he and Chairman Murad were pleased with the

DCM's visit, and passed regards to Ambassador Kenney. He recounted the history of Muslim oppression at the hands of Spanish colonialists, which ceased under American military occupation in the early 20th century, only to resume when Americans began "Filipinizing" governance of Mindanao in the 1920s. Former Chairman of the MILF Salamat Hashim wrote to President Bush in 2003, seeking U.S. support for peace negotiations with the government of the Philippines.

Mimbantas reminded that the response from then-EAP Assistant Secretary Kelly included the acknowledgment of "legitimate grievances that must be addressed." Mimbantas said he was convinced that America could help conclude the negotiations.

¶4. (C) Mimbantas also recalled President Bush's admonition during his state visit to the Philippines in 2003 that the MILF should sever all ties to terrorism. "We oppose terrorism, and when we have control over Muslim territories, there will be no possibility of terrorist operations," Mimbantas assured. DCM acknowledged MILF actions, particularly in 2005, to remove terrorists from MILF areas. (Note: several significant terrorists resettled in 2005 on Jolo Island, outside of MILF areas, where they operate to this day.) However, DCM continued, foreigners, and some Filipino Muslims, continue to take advantage of MILF territories to conduct bomb training and actual bombing operations that have killed and injured many Muslims and Christians in Mindanao. Some MILF commanders are not doing enough or appear complicit, even if MILF policy opposes such activities. As an example, DCM cited Abdul Basit Usman, who lives openly in the 105th base command led by MILF Commander Umbar Kato. Mimbantas listened carefully, and responded that "this person you mention" had been discussed in private

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meetings with MILF Chairman Murad, Chief of Staff Sammy Gambar, and Mimbantas. Mimbantas said he thought something was being done about Kato, but had not heard recently. DCM said that we would welcome the opportunity to have quiet discussions about other individuals of concern, noting Ambassador Kenney and he had made the same suggestion to Chairman Murad.

Muslim Grievance and the Peace Process

¶5. (C) Mimbantas' central message was that the MILF wanted peace and that America could help convince the government to sign a peace agreement. He recounted Spanish oppression of Muslims in the Philippines, which ended with the American occupation, only to begin again when the Americans transferred local governing authorities to Philippine Christians in the 1920s. Mimbantas handed DCM a copy of the 1935 petition signed by Muslim local leaders asking the U.S. President not to include Mindanao in the promised independent Philippines, but instead to maintain U.S. sovereignty until the Muslims would be ready to govern themselves.

¶6. (C) Mimbantas expressed apparently genuine concern that the imminent departure of Malaysian members of the International Monitoring Team would lead to more violations of the government-MILF ceasefire. Neither side may be able to control its fighters without a referee, as was the case before the Malaysians' arrival in 2004, Mimbantas said. If fighting broke out, the MILF would have a clear conscience, Mimbantas continued, since the MILF had tried its best with the peace process. DCM reiterated U.S. support for a negotiated peace, and encouraged Mimbantas to persevere with the peace process.

Letter for the Ambassador

¶7. (C) Mimbantas handed DCM a remarkably well written letter from him to Ambassador Kenney, which made the following

points (entire text faxed to desk):

-- Reiterated deep appreciation for the response on behalf of President Bush to the letter from late Chairman Salamat Hashim which said, "The United States recognizes that the Muslims of southern Philippines have serious, legitimate grievances that must be addressed;"

-- Thanked the USG for its efforts to bring peace and development to Mindanao;

-- Stressed that the political nature of the problem requires a political solution. "Poverty, underdevelopment . . . are consequences of the political injustice . . . of illegal and immoral annexation of our homeland ;"

-- Pressed for negotiations. "(I)t is to the advantage and best interest of all domestic and foreign stakeholders in Mindanao that the Bangsamoro problem be finally resolved through the present GRP-MILF peace negotiation A failure to sign a comprehensive peace agreement with the MILF at this time may engender extreme frustration and irreversible hopelessness . . . that would result in radicalization of a significant number of Muslim youths ;"

-- The MILF is "a legitimate revolutionary organization, a liberation movement, fighting to redeem what is legally and historically ours. The cause we are fighting for is not dissimilar to the cause for which the founding fathers of your nation established the United States of America." The MILF is not a terrorist organization, "as we condemn and oppose all forms of terrorism that victimize innocent people ;"

-- "It is necessary that local and international pressure be applied on the reneging party to comply with the mutually agreed consensus points and agreements and move on until a final and just political settlement is reached. It is in this context that we need the United States to do its part."

U.S. Assistance, Chinese Influence in Mindanao

¶8. (C) Vice Chairman Mimbartas clearly reiterated MILF policy to welcome all U.S. humanitarian and development

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assistance in Mindanao. His statement was identical to what we have heard from Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazali Jaafar. Mimbartas added, however, that "the people" object when the U.S. military, rather than civilians, deliver U.S. assistance. While the MILF supports all assistance, the people's sensitivities must be respected, he concluded.

¶9. (C) Mimbartas expressed strong concern over what he said is a large number of Chinese interested in buying economic assets in Mindanao. He worried that the government was not sufficiently careful in preventing the Chinese from buying important assets, such as those in the steel, cement, and power sectors. Muslims are happy to deal with Christians, Jews, and other Muslims, but not "godless Chinese," he said.

Atmospherics and Biographic Data

¶10. (C) After the 40-minute one-on-one meeting, Mimbartas invited DCM and delegation to join MILF military and civilian leaders in a friendly, informal traditional lunch. The interpreter for the DCM's meeting was medical Dr. Safrullah Dipatuan, whose titles include Chief of Staff to Mimbartas, Deputy Chairman of the Bangsamoro Development Agency, and member of the government-MILF Ad Hoc Joint Action Group, responsible for coordinated anti-crime efforts. During the

DCM's meeting, DATT and A/RSOs conversed with MILF military and civilian leaders, leading to easy and informal conversation over lunch. Other key MILF officials present included Central Committee member Bobby Alonto, commander Jannati Mimbartas (brother of Vice Chairman Mimbartas), and MILF liaison officer Acmed Lao. A warm farewell followed lunch and the delegation departed.

¶11. (C) Despite his title of Vice Chairman for Military Affairs, Mimbartas appears foremost to be the leading representative of the Maranao ethnic group (as opposed to the Maguindanao ethnic group of MILF Chairman Murad). In other ways, Mimbartas defied stereotypes. He portrayed a close relationship with Chairman Murad, noting that he had discussed DCM's visit with Murad the previous day. (During the Ambassador's visit to Murad's camp, Mimbartas sat next to Murad.) Mimbartas seemed genuinely interested in the success of peace talks. He described his role in the MILF's military structure as responsible for policy, whereas Chief of Staff Sammy Gambar directly supervised MILF commanders. Mimbartas related that when MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim died in 2003, Murad, who was at that time Vice Chairman for military affairs and concurrently military Chief of Staff, tried to convince Mimbartas to become Chairman. After several weeks of discussions, Mimbartas said he succeeded in turning the tables so that Murad would become Chairman.

Biographic Data

¶12. (C) Mimbartas was born and raised in Masiu, a town on Lake Lanao near the Butig camp. He spent 10 years at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, returning to the Philippines in 1974 to take up the Muslim fight. Apologizing for his halting English, Mimbartas said he speaks Arabic better than his Maranao mother tongue, having received his bachelors degree in Arabic literature. He speaks English reasonably well, but slowly and self-consciously, and understands much, but not all. Mimbartas farms coffee and other crops, as he said many MILF commanders do. He lives a four-hour hike up the mountains, at Camp Cararao, from the site of the meeting with the DCM. He has two wives, 13 children and many grandchildren, several of whom live at Camp Cararao too. While he used to hike by foot, his age requires him to use a horse to reach his home camp, which receives cell phone and television signals. He said he travels to the Camp of Chairman Murad and to other MILF commands as needed, but clearly spends much of his time at his own camp. Mimbartas seemed to genuinely look forward to the opportunity to visit Manila, which he said was impossible for him now. Like many other MILF commanders, he appeared to want to wrap up with some satisfaction a cause to which he dedicated his entire life; hence, his support for a negotiated peace. The question is whether the government and the MILF can agree on the terms of the peace.

KENNEY